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# THEOLOGY/RELIGIOUS STUDIES: WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE 1965?

By Patrick W. Carey

**T**he nature and aims of theology/religious studies as a discipline within the Catholic colleges have undergone considerable reconceptualization since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). I argue here, as I have in two previous essays (see documentation in *American Catholic Traditions: Resources for Renewal*, 1997, and *Trying Times: Essays on Higher Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1999) that by the middle of the 1970s the nature and aims of the college discipline (whether conceived of as theology or religious studies) were fairly firmly established. The discipline was conceived of as the academic study of religion with a host of internal methodologies and disciplinary specializations. Its aim was not to foster faith or confessionalism (as was a general aim of college theology prior to the 1960s) but to examine and understand the universal religious dimension of human existence, whether evident in world religions or specific Christian denominations or secular enterprises.

From 1965 to 1975, moreover, many drew sharp distinctions between theology and religious studies. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, some began to question the disciplinary developments of the previous decade and called for a redefinition of both theology and religious studies that emphasized their continuities rather than their discontinuities. Some, too, began to call attention to what was called the fragmentation within the discipline of theology and advocated a reform that focused upon the underlying and internal unity of the specializations within the discipline. By the 1990s, a few departments were beginning to reexamine the discipline and a curriculum that had little internal coherence or intelligibility. The movement in the last forty years, therefore, can be described as an ongoing movement from disciplinary specialization, diversification, and secularization to one of post-critical reconceptualization.

This interpretive thesis has its limits. First of all it is based primarily upon the changing conceptions of the nature and

purpose of the discipline that were published in national journals since about 1965; it has not been tested by what actually was taking place in the 230 departments of theology and religious studies in the Catholic colleges and universities. The essay focuses, therefore, upon the conception of aims and not upon the actual curricular implementation of those changing aims, and is divided into two sections: first, an examination of the discussions on the aims of the discipline and some of the institutional changes that took place between about 1965 and 1975; and second, a brief summary of some rethinking of the discipline since the late 1970s.

## Theology as an Academic Discipline: 1965 to 1975

The most dramatic changes in the discipline of college theology took place from 1965 to 1975, a decade of optimistic hopefulness, radical changes, and turmoil in all American institutions. Changes in the discipline reflected responses to internal needs within the Catholic colleges and to external definitions of the standards of the discipline in the national academy.

The Second Vatican Council provided some legitimation for change within the discipline even though in itself it was not responsible for the climate of change that was going on in the discipline. By the end of the Second Vatican Council it was clear to many theologians that a fundamental shift had taken place in the very conception of theology at the Council. The neo-scholastic or dogmatic approach to theology, which had dominated so much of the pre-Vatican II church, had been

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displaced to some extent by a new kind of theological scholarship that had itself significantly influenced theological developments at the Council.

At the annual meeting of the College Theology Society in 1972 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., one of the major theological leaders within postconciliar theology, characterized the situation as a "Revolution in Catholic Theology" (See *A World More Human A Church More Christian*, 1973). For him this meant that the twentieth century emergence of linguistic, exegetical, and historical innovative scholarship and research had simply eliminated the "old style" dogmatic theology. The new techniques

of research and the development of what Lonergan in other places called "functional specialties" had made the dogmatic and metaphysical approaches of the past obsolete. The empirical, rather than

the normative, notion of culture and a modern understanding of a person's historicity and subjectivity, moreover, helped to bring about a revolutionary

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turn to the subject and to history in Catholic theology during the twentieth century—a movement that was clearly evident in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

The upshot of this revolution in scholarship and perspective was a theological realization that the "cognitive meaning of Christianity is continually realized in ever changing situations." The twentieth century theological research and scholarship that helped to shape the Council, moreover, was influenced by modern developments in science and philosophy, which helped to dethrone the speculative intellect—and for Lonergan these tendencies in modern thought were not to be altogether deplored. The result of this revolution in theology, he believed, was a lot less emphasis upon metaphysics in theology and more emphasis upon history,

*A fundamental shift  
had taken place*



Dumbach Hall, Loyola University Chicago.



hermeneutics, and cognitional theories that had a tendency to meet the conceptual frameworks of modern science and philosophy and at the same time to restore earlier pre-scholastic forms of Christian theology.

**L**oneragan's description of modernization and specialization in theology indicated a transformation that had taken place in the field by the early 1970s, but his positive view of the change was not universally accepted. Nevertheless, it was clear by the mid 1970s that the direction of the discipline was toward what was called the academic study of religion in Catholic as well as in public colleges and universities. Precisely what the academic study of religion meant was a topic of considerable national discussion. Professional institutions (e.g. the American Academy of Religion [AAR]) as well as individuals defined "academic" as an empirical, comparative, descriptive, objective, neutral approach to the study of religion as a universal human phenomenon. Catholic departments of theology or religion were not uninfluenced by these national developments. Not only did they want to be considered respectable academic disciplines within their own Catholic colleges but they wanted to win a place for their understanding of the discipline in the national academy.

Within Catholic institutions of higher learning the discussion of the *raison d'être* of the discipline moved in two different directions by the late 1960s, but both directions were influenced by the movement toward the academic study of religion. Some departments, which had formerly been called theology, changed their names to religious studies, indicating that they were no longer offering a purely confessional [i.e., Catholic] approach to the study of religion. Other departments retained their designation as theology but broadened their understanding of the nature of theological studies.

Whether departments considered themselves

religious studies or theological departments, most Catholic departments moved away from what they perceived to be the pastoral and spiritual functions that were generally associated with the aims of instruction in the most recent past. Both religious studies and theological departments considered themselves rigorously academic and that meant that they separated the study about religion (as a universal phenomenon of human life that was evident in particular religious traditions) from the spiritual formation of the student.

By the mid 1970s, it would seem, most departments had a curriculum in place that reflected the aims of the academic study of religion, whether they considered themselves religious studies or theology. In curricular practice that meant that courses in theology/religious studies were primarily elective courses, even in those schools that required some theology/religious studies courses for graduation. The curriculum registered a lively diversity and in the course of time a proliferation of elective courses. This meant that a student could take a course in Native American religions, one in Buddhism, and/or one in the Bible without taking any sequence of courses that showed some signs of progressive advancement in a discipline. In some Catholic colleges this approach made perfect sense because those colleges had abandoned the universal requirement and departments of religious studies/theology had to develop exotic or special interest courses that would appeal to students' interests—without concern for the integrity of a discipline.

The benefits of the elective approach in the curriculum were many. The curriculum represented variety, students' interests, and faculty specializations (in many universities the undergraduate programs mirrored the specializations that were evident in the graduate program).

The developments within the discipline, it seems to me, also produced a curriculum that eventually made little sense to anyone, lacked disciplinary definition or integration, brought about a confusion of

internal departmental aims, and had a difficult time explaining to those in other disciplines precisely what it was that theology (or religious studies) did as a discipline and how it in any unique way contributed to the overall mission of higher education.

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Le Moyne College.

The problem became not just one of the Catholic identity of the discipline, but one of defining the discipline. The discipline itself had developed into a great variety of “functional specialties” and ideological and cultural perspectives, and by the early 1970s the curricular offerings resembled an elective approach consistent with various specialties but one that lacked curricular coherence. Few during the 1970s, as far as I am aware, drew much attention to this growing fragmentation of the discipline; those who did approved this direction did so because they were trying desperately to avoid the pitfalls of indoctrination and of a confessional straitjacket that they believed had been the faults of the previous system of theological education in the Catholic colleges and universities.

## II. From Fragmentation to Post-Critical Reexamination Since the Mid 1970s

In the second half of the 1970s, two separate but interrelated new developments occurred within the discussion of the discipline at the national level. On the one hand, some, like Schubert M. Ogden, professor of theology at Southern Methodist University, began to question the conventional definitions of religious studies and theology. As president of the

AAR in 1977 he attempted in his presidential address to redefine the two disciplines by emphasizing the continuities rather than discontinuities between them. On the other hand, a few theologians, like Edward Farley, professor of theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School, following in Ogden's footsteps, called for a more thorough re-examination of the discipline, but they focused on the deleterious effects of fragmentation within theology and advocated a recovery of the unity of the discipline. In 1983, Farley published *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (1983), arguing historically and theologically that the eighteenth and nineteenth century encyclopedia approach to theology, which continued to inform much of contemporary theological education, had fragmented the material unity of the discipline and made it primarily a professional discipline (i.e., oriented to the preparation of clergy) rather than an essential part of Christian paideia and Christian wisdom.

Not everyone, of course, agreed with Farley's interpretation of the problem. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza of Harvard, for example, argued that rather than decrying the fragmentation, it was better to see specialization itself as a necessity of the modern process of rationalization and if perceived in this way one could more clearly approach the reconstruction of theological education as a hermeneutical and practical task.



However one interpreted the problem and solution of contemporary religious studies and theological education, it was clear that by the mid 1980s there were a number in the American academy calling for a reexamination of the discipline.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s those in Catholic colleges and universities do not appear to have published any significant manifestos that seriously questioned or reexamined the discipline. One reason for this might be that theology/religious studies departments in many Catholic colleges and universities (with some exceptions no doubt) did not in practice separate theological from religious studies courses in the curriculum. In most cases, it appears, courses that were descriptive, historical, phenomenological, and objective ran parallel to courses that were theological in content and method, and the offering of a smorgasbord of courses had little conceptual or disciplinary relationship to one another.

B

y 1990 and thereafter—stimulated to some extent by the previous discussion, the publication of Pope John Paul II's *Ex corde ecclesiae* (the apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education), and their own experiences of the fragmentation of the discipline—a few Catholic theologians began to identify various problems in graduate and undergraduate theological education. They acknowledged (implicitly or explicitly) the need to reform a discipline that had lost internal coherence, that had excessively separated intellectual training from moral and spiritual formation, and that had accepted some of the secularizing influences that accompanied modern thought patterns. These calls for rethinking and reforming the discipline became the subject of a national convention on *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition* (1997) held at Marquette University in 1995. That conference focused on the difficulties within the discipline at the undergraduate, graduate and seminary levels and suggested some directions for its future reform.

The national discussion of the aims and criteria of the discipline continued after 1995. Avery Dulles,

S.J., the dean of American Catholic theologians, was among the leaders who called for a redefinition of the discipline in Catholic colleges and universities. He reinterpreted the tasks, methods, and criteria of theology in its new postconciliar situation and in its new locus in the colleges and universities. In a post-critical age, he urged Catholic theology to use the critical tools

of modernity, be self-consciously aware of their limits, acknowledge its own presuppositions in faith, be accountable to Scripture and Tradition and the church's teaching, and operate in communion with the magisterium. He noted, too, a tendency toward re-confessionalization in the ecumenical movement and in some theologians, but it is unclear how extensive that tendency is in contemporary theological education at the college level.

Although a few departments in Catholic colleges and universities began to reform their undergraduate and graduate programs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is difficult to determine, given the present status of scholarship, how widespread was the awareness of the need for reform in the discipline, and even more difficult to determine how many departments were actually involved in reforming their theology and/or religious studies programs.

## Conclusion

The historian, as John Courtney Murray, S.J., once noted, looks for what is "going forward" in history. What seems to be going forward in the last twenty years in theology/religious studies is a re-examination of the discipline in a direction that continues to value specialization and pluralism, that is wary of the problems of fragmentation, that is seeking new ways to construct an intelligible coherent curriculum, and that emphasizes anew the need to relate theology to other disciplines in the university. This ongoing re-examination is by no means universal and does not even where it exists find substantive agreement on the direction of reforming the discipline. The discipline is still in a considerable state of flux, searching for a definition of its aims and tasks that can be implemented in a coherent curriculum. In this regard, the discipline of theology/religious studies is not unlike the specialization and fragmentation that has taken place in other college and university disciplines. ■

*...the discipline ...had excessively separated intellectual training from moral and spiritual formation.*